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ABSTRACT

A study by researchers in Hickory, North Carolina, examined student perceptions of a summer school reading program used in two Alexander County elementary schools. Surveys were completed by each second and third grade student participating in the summer school reading program. Content analysis was used to examine student responses to open-ended questions on the survey. Results indicated that 50% of the students clearly believed they learned to read better. Further, when asked what they liked best about summer school, 26% responded that they liked learning to read, 15% said that they liked playing outside, and another 15% liked playing. Another 12% said they liked art and 9% indicated that the best thing about summer school was their teacher. Findings suggest that the summer school reading program should not be more of the same as what students had during the regular school year, but should be varied and different, offering them study about things that interest them, like dinosaurs and animals. (Contains two tables of data and five references.) (CR)

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Student Perceptions of a Summer School Reading Program

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Running head: Summer Reading Program

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Running Head: SUMMER READING PROGRAM

Abstract

Researchers in Hickory, NC conducted a study to examine student perceptions of a summer school reading program used in two Alexander County elementary schools. Surveys were completed by each second and third grade student participating in the summer school reading program. Content analysis was used to examine student responses to open ended questions on the survey.

The study concluded that a majority of the students clearly believed they learned to read better. When asked what they liked best about summer school 26% responded that they liked learning to read better, 15% said they liked playing outside and another 15% liked playing best. Another 12% said they liked art. Nine percent indicated that the best thing about summer school was his/her teacher.

The results of this study will be helpful in determining the content as well as activities for future summer school reading programs.

Student Perceptions of a Summer School Reading Program

This study focused on the perceptions of students who attended a summer school reading program in two Alexander County elementary schools. Key questions of interest in the study were (a) "What did you learn this summer?" (b) "What did you like best about summer school?" (c) "What did you like least about summer school?"

Method

Surveys were completed by each second and third grade student in attendance on the last day of the summer reading program. Content analysis was used to examine student responses to the open-ended questions on the survey. Appropriate descriptive statistics and tables were then constructed to present the data.

Program Description

Students surveyed were in the 2nd and 3rd grade classes of the Summer School Reader Program of the Alexander County North Carolina Public Schools. Students were selected for the program based on the following criteria: Low test scores in reading or reading below grade level, and parental permission to attend.

The program was in session from 8:00 a.m. - 12:00 p.m. each day from June 19 - August 4, 1995 with a vacation week coinciding with the July 4th holiday. The program was offered to students who were in grades K - 3 during the previous school year.

Teachers for the program were selected from the faculty and staff of the Alexander County Public Schools, and included 20 teacher education students from Lenior-Rhyne College. The program was directed by classroom teachers and curriculum specialists and five

master teachers. The master teachers worked with groups of four teacher education students to design and implement language arts activities and individualized reading based on First Steps, a reading intervention program developed by Darrel Morris at Appalachian State University.

The program was available to students at no cost and free bus transportation was also available. Stated goals of the project were:

1. To improve reading skills of students.
2. To encourage students to want to read.
3. To reduce the loss of language knowledge which occurs over a long summer vacation.

Results

The first question on the survey was, "What did you learn this summer?" Fifty percent of the students said they learned to read better (see Table 1). For example, one student stated, "I learned I could read better," while another stated, "I learned about nouns, verbs and adjectives." "I learned to read a new book," stated a student. One other student added spelling, "I learned to spell and read better."

Twenty-nine percent of the students said they learned about dinosaurs. The remaining 21% of students stated they learned to do work better; learned parts of speech; learned about animals and one student stated, "I learned to calm my anger."

The second survey question was, "What did you like best about summer school?" Twenty-six percent said they best liked learning to read and read better (Table 2). One student responded by saying, "Reading was fun," and another, "I learned how to read better."

As one might suspect another 15% of the students said they liked playing outside the best and another 15% simply said they liked playing best. Twelve percent said they liked art best. One student said, "I loved to tie-dye shirts." Another 9% of the students stated that they liked their teacher the best. For example one student said, "I liked my very nice teacher." Interestingly, 6% of the students stated that they liked knowing the people they were in summer school with best and one student stated, "...I'm glad I was with people I knew." Another said, "I had good friends." The remaining students stated they liked the work best; they liked summer school; and the fun they had.

The third survey question was, "What did you like least about summer school?" Twenty-seven percent stated they liked the work least (Table 3). For example several students said, "The work." Fifteen percent reported liking writing the least. One student said, "I didn't like writing in the journal," and another said, "I didn't like the writing center." Another 12% of the students stated they liked reading least of all. Encouragingly, 9% of the students said there was nothing they did not like. For example one student said, "There was nothing I didn't like." The long bus ride was liked least by 6% of the students. One student specifically stated, "They pick us up as 8:00 or 8:05am." Another 6% stated they didn't like playing. One clearly stated, "I didn't like going outside." Another 6% stated they didn't like it when they did not get GAK (a reward). These two students both responded, "I didn't get the gak."

Discussion

There were several key findings in this study which will be helpful in determining the content as well as activities for future summer school programs. Clearly, according to the

student surveys, a majority of the students believed they learned to read better. Students learned about things that interested them like dinosaurs and animals. In any classroom situation the teacher plays a central role in the success of the summer school reading program. According to Durkin 1987, comprehending is the very essence of reading and teachers should feel obligated to give a good deal of attention to teaching students how to comprehend. Undoubtedly, these students were learning about dinosaurs through reading which expanded their comprehension. Time to play and do art were central themes the students liked. Another key seems to be that the students like going to summer school where they have friends and people they already know. While no student stated they liked getting rewards best, two students said what they like least was that they didn't get the reward. Certainly, rewards play some part in the teaching-learning equation.

We can also learn from the negative aspects reported by the students such as the long bus ride. Are there better ways of transporting our students that minimizes the long bus rides? For the 27% who stated they didn't like the work--are there ways of making work time more fun and interesting? According to Durkin, 1987, "Even though entertainment is not the educator's concern, doing what interests children is, because when they are interested (and learning something, too), behavior problems are kept to a minimum." Further Durkin, 1987 states that effective reading teachers are: Decision makers--making instruction and practice decisions; classroom managers; introspective--reviewing how they are doing and where they can be more effective; prepared, but flexible; and sensitive--to children's problems.

Research has shown over the years that increased learning time seems to indicate that more time yields better achievement (Dewalt & Rodwell, 1988). While this study did not

specifically look at this aspect, Dewalt & Rodwell, 1988 stated, "There is a message here for educators. Positive student attitudes toward instruction may be one link to increased achievement that we often fail to consider when mandating innovations in education." One important finding in their study revealed, "...content presented in the remedial math classes was described as 'more of the same,' 'frustrating--learn a little bit of everything,' and 'practice'... Increasing allocated time without varying the type of the content presented to the students did not result in increased student achievement." The conclusion we might draw in our study is that the summer school reading program should not be "more of the same" as they had during the regular school year. Rather, the content should be varied and different--like learning about dinosaurs or animals. We might add to this that having some friends in the class and people the students are already familiar with makes summer learning less stressful and more fun as well.

As in any well run business in today's global market the one question we must continually ask ourselves is, "What do our customers think of our product?" In this case our customers are the students. Our product is education. Quality, packaging, selling and delivering our product on-time are as critical to our success as it is for General Motors or Ford if they are to compete against the foreign car manufactures. After all, we too in the United States educational system compete (and are measured) with foreign countries in terms of academic success. Student perceptions of this summer program seem to indicate that the summer school reading program is a viable alternative to increasing reading effectiveness--our product. Our customer's (students) feedback can help us improve our quality and product if we only listen. What have our customers told us in this study? They have indicated that

learning and reading about dinosaurs (something that interests them), playing outside and playing, getting rewards like "GAK", having a good teacher, doing art, having some food, and knowing the people in class are important to them.

Previous authors tend to confirm some of our findings. For example, Tancock (1994) outlines four underlying beliefs that are helpful in working with children with reading problems. First is that many children with reading problems do not demonstrate reading and writing strengths, however, people working with these students, "...must believe that they can learn to be good readers and writers." Secondly, children need the support of predictable, authentic and meaningful whole texts. Thirdly, "Teachers must provide engaging texts for their students that can touch their lives in some small way." Fourth, Tancock (1994) believes that teachers should, "...focus on students' strengths and plan lessons that build on those strengths." Finally, "Readers and writers need to be encouraged to make guesses and to develop as risk takers."

Schuder (1993) writes about another summer program designed to increase reading skills. Schuder (1993) who helped develop a theory-based reading program to help at-risk students called SAIL (Students Achieving Independent Learning) stated that each lesson in this program has three primary purposes: "(a) to help students understand (get the gist of) whatever they are reading or listening to, (b) to encourage students to work hard and have fun doing so, and (c) to help students learn something (e.g., strategies) that will help them read or listen with understanding more successfully on following occasions (retention, generalization, and transfer)." One of the guidelines for the SAIL program is to make certain that every student always succeeds. This is accomplished by starting at the students proficiency level

then working from there. This SAIL program was introduced in a Chapter I summer school for at-risk students. Positive feedback was also received from students in this summer school program by the end of the second year. Schuder (1994) summarizes this programs main tenet very well, "SAIL assumes no student deficits: In fact, SAIL assumes nothing about students except their capacity to learn."

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Table 1

Students' response to the statement, "What did you learn this summer?"

Learned	Frequency	%
How to Read-Better	17	50
About Dinosaurs	10	29
Do Work	2	6
Parts of Speech	2	6
About Animals	2	6
Calm My Anger	1	3

N=34
TOTAL--Hiddenite and Bethlehem Elementary

Table 2

Students' response to the statement, "What did you like best about summer school?"

Best Liked	Frequency	%
How to Read-Better	9	26
Playing Outside	5	15
Playing	5	15
Art	4	12
Teacher	3	9
Food	3	9
Work	2	6
Know People	2	6
Other	2	6
I Liked It	1	3
Fun	1	3

N=34
TOTAL--Hiddenite and Bethlehem Elementary

Table 3

Students' responses to the statement, "What did you like least about summer school?"

Least Liked	Frequency	%
Work	9	27
Writing	5	15
Reading	4	12
Nothing (Liked All)	3	9
Other	3	9
Long Bus Ride	2	6
Playing	2	6
Did Not Get GAK (a reward)	2	6
Not Going Outside	2	6
Going Outside	1	3

N=33
TOTAL--Hiddenite and Bethlehem Elementary